

Offering On Line Courses: Policy Issues For The Small College

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Introduction

Some critics of the U.S. post secondary education system often express concern about declining quality while others point to lack of access for some members of our population. These two concerns are also becoming more apparent as colleges further develop on line courses through the Internet.

In a speech given at St. Francis College, Arthur Levine, president of Teachers College of Columbia University, outlines five forces that are pressing the modern university: the rise of the “information economy”, changing demographics, new technologies, privatization of higher education, convergence of knowledge producers. (1)

In an informational economy rewards come from intellectual capital and acquiring knowledge. This setting puts even greater demands on participants in the workforce to seek higher education in some form. There is also pressure to be at the forefront or at least stay current within your chosen profession. Hence witness the greater use of continuing education, professional development programs and “life-long learning”. With a growing number of high school graduates looking to enroll in lower cost institutions as well international students seeking more education within the United States the college sector will be confronted with capacity issues. More people will be participating in post-secondary education than ever before with part time adult learners probably the fastest growing component.

Institutional Characteristics

It has been suggested there are three groups of post secondary higher education institutions:

- elite higher education for a privileged few in preparation for roles in government and the learned professions,
- mass higher educational institutions preparing another elite group for technical and economic organizations,
- universal access institutions preparing the general public for life in a modern information based society characterized by rapid social and technological change.(Dunning)

Currently most of higher education consists of defined periods of time, earned credits for time spent and a degree awarded after achieving a certain number of credits. The notion being that teaching occurs while the student concurrently sits in a chair. (2)

Elite higher education institutions consist of structured programs and reflect traditional academic notions of degree course work. Courses consist of formal instruction

with the desire of fostering personal relationships between students and teachers. Students often come from elite secondary or preparatory schools to attend on a full time basis and the student body tends to be homogeneous.

Mass higher education institutions offer curricula that are suited to a larger audience. Large institutions can reach up to populations of fifty thousand. Some programs can be comprehensive but instruction is often characterized by large lectures and administrations are more bureaucratic.

There is a diverse mix of residential and commuter students. Students flow in and out of different sectors with students often taking longer to complete their degrees. Examples of these institutions would be the large state funded public institutions.

Universal access institutions are bit different. They tend to have more modular curricula and instruction tends to be more unstructured. Traditional academic structure and the notion of standards may not exist. New forms of technology often deliver instruction. Students are not looking for campus life or a sense of community and typically have work experience. Examples of which would be the new "virtual institutions" and the "continuing education" programs offered by established institutions.

The American educational system seems to be moving from focusing on an "elite" student group towards more universal access. From the GI Bill of Rights during the 1950's to the growth of trade schools and community colleges in the 1960's and the 1970's access to post secondary education has been broadened. The use of new technologies in computers and telecommunications is another step towards this direction.

For example, we can take the case of the US Army which has developed an ambitious program to develop the professionalism of its soldiers. The U.S. Army with its 87 programs from 24 different participating educational institutions with an estimated audience of 80,000 students (over a period of five years) might be the largest on line program in existence. (Eskey, p 32)

In developing its program, the Army defined its student body as active-duty soldiers, officers, military dependents, military retirees and civilians. The challenge being to serve a mobile soldier: being on call, ready to relocate at a moments notice, having families as well as demanding schedules and having access to the appropriate technology to participate at any participating institutions around the world.

The advantages for the student in participating in on line learning are: no time spend commuting to class, no travel costs, maintaining military status while learning, no geographical constraints, developing new skills from using the technology and in general having a more educated soldier.

To participate, an institution had to meet several criteria such as able to provide the necessary equipment, instructors that are qualified to participate and an administration that can provide the policy guidance to monitor such things as credible course assessment, academic honesty, adequate course standards and the lack of face to face contact between students and faculty.

Virtual Universities (i.e. University of Phoenix, Jones International University) seem to have come about due to entrepreneurial inspiration. (Jones) The traditional institutions are in a sense more challenged as they find their respective way to adapt their respective structures. Existing organizations that are more committed to long distance learning seem to be the mass educational institutions that are willing to transition to universal education. (3)

Faculty

College faculty can find motivation in participating in on line course development. Professors across disciplines are attempting to apply what's available on the Internet in their respective disciplines.

Agarwal and Day were very positive about the use of the Internet in teaching Economics courses. They felt value was added to the classroom through greater faculty contact with greater access to instructors through the use of bulletin boards and email. Also more interesting assignments were designed with the use of Internet as they were more "hands-on" hence providing a better understanding of the subject matter. (Agarwal)

Baker and White found in a survey of accounting professors that most of the professors try to introduce the use of the Internet in the more advanced courses because they believe it is important for students to be exposed to its use.

Uses include: email for communicating between students and faculty, accessing Web sites for current information and participating in discussion groups in accounting related issues. (Baker and White)

Students

Characteristics of the post secondary student body have changed with more growth in higher education enrollment towards the non-traditional student. Traditional students are usually viewed as being within the age of 18- 22 years of age; attend school full time and living on or near campus. Non traditional students are somewhat different than for traditional students.

Non –Traditional students are usually over 25 years of age, more ethnically diverse, work full time, have family responsibilities, prefer to stay close to home or work and are usually part time. Distance learning might be the mode to meet some of this additional demand; a mechanism toward reaching those people whom are geographically remote, have lack of time, or face family and job pressures.(4)

For these non-traditional students, college education is one of several activities they are concerned about; other activities include work, family, and various civic and social obligations. Hence they expect a different relationship from a college or university than the traditional student does. The characteristics are: convenience, customized service, and quality – all at low cost.

Non-traditional students are hesitant to pay for things they don't use. The costs for going to college are often viewed as excessive characterized by fancy campuses with faculty being encouraged to spend less time in the classroom and often hard to find. They may prefer a "no frills" leaner version of higher education with no fancy electives or no student activities. If one believes that on line students do just as well as traditional students, then the delivery of an on line course can be viewed as a basic product without the beer drinking, dating or joining fraternities/sororities.

Those institutions looking to expand or even simply maintain enrollment are becoming motivated to better serve the part time student. To adapt, an institution must note that adult learning is different from adolescent learning. Adult learners seek more learner-centered (possibly more customized) approaches while traditional models of learning are characterized by stepwise, sequenced institutional model are often what they

encounter. Post secondary education is moving toward a decentralized structure with more options for the learner and institutions such as the community college may be most suited in this process.

While incentives for participating in on line course development for students and faculty may be one of curiosity or convenience, a small college administration may have to adopt the Internet in order to ensure survival. Incentives for these colleges include: expansion of enrollment, enhance the image of the College, being able to claim that it is on the cutting edge of innovative education, or simply doing what other colleges are doing.

Adapt or Disappear

If small colleges do not adapt they may find their respective brand names obsolete. (Davis and Bodkin) There are additional competitive pressures as there are more “outside” higher education providers such as libraries, museums, and corporate universities.

New technologies are also emerging that will make long distance learning more interesting and appealing with more graphical capabilities and possibly face to face interaction. The Business world is moving fast to apply some of the new technologies. Entrepreneurs see the higher education sector as ripe for profit making opportunities with many students often subsidized by financial aid programs. (5)

With more outside providers will probably come more program assessment, innovation and emphasis on better customer service. Education will be more customized with courses given in varying units of time. Investment in education may follow where the students are, as opposed to where the institutions are.

New providers will place more emphasis on teaching as opposed to being research focused. (Jones) Virtual and hybrid universities will compete for faculty to conduct courses that will be taught worldwide. Faculty, in turn will be interested in offering on line courses since they can have a more flexible work schedule by working at home.

Concerns

But as faculty, students and college administrators find intrigue in on line courses, there are areas of concern.

Students are often not pleased. While students did feel there were some advantages to taking Internet courses, they felt the quality of instruction was inferior. Students often start thinking an online class will be easier than a traditional course and then find the course requires more time than originally perceived. . Not all students may be geared for on line learning, as the more technical the course, usually the more difficult it is to complete. Students are often not equipped to succeed in the course that requires substantial discipline and time management skills.

Various technical aspects of the course may need to serve as prerequisites – i.e. where to find relevant documents on the appropriate website, how to download appropriate documents, take an online exam. Students often feel at a loss from the lack of face-to-face contact. More time may be necessary to complete the course. Students can often end up disappointed with the experience.

A suggestion for improvement would be to have a screening process for students who wish to take an online class or a “learning styles” assessment tool that would be helpful in determining who would benefit from an online course. An advisement process might consist of:

- a ‘virtual orientation’ and a ‘virtual review’ for students and faculty,
- a process to help ease the isolation experience by the student,
- provide a list of technical skills that a student will need to participate in such a course, and offer a tutorial or workshop prior to taking a course.

Faculty also have their stories to tell. Faculty have the burden of ensuring that the integrity and learning content of the course are maintained. They tend to expect students to be prepared, have the necessary hardware and software and to be able to perform the necessary tasks in an on line class.

In a survey, some of the faculty responses included:

- Internet courses were inferior to traditional equivalent courses,
- those who were teaching Internet courses felt that they could improve the quality of their respective courses,
- there is a learning curve for adapting a course for the virtual environment,
- there is a time commitment to organize, design and implement a virtual course,
- faculty felt strongly about the need for institutional support such as release time and reduction in committee work. (Terry)

The role for Internet based instruction with regards to Promotion and Tenure were not clear. Faculty who are recruited to teach on line courses often wonder if this helps their promotion opportunities. Besides the lack of recognition in qualifying for promotion and tenure, student evaluations tended to be less favorable for Internet based courses. Faculty in turn find they must grade with more care or else their online course will not be taken seriously.

At the time of this survey, over 90% of the faculty reported that there were no incentives for integrating Internet based applications into their courses with the remainder saying there were minimal incentives. There will also be a need for teacher training programs to upgrade the skills for those that wish to participate.

Concluding comments

The small college must address such policy issues as:

- who will enroll,
- who will teach,
- what will be taught,
- how will we evaluate,
- how is this to be financed and who should pay?

The image of many is that distance learning is a “diploma mill.” The lack of regulation means that there will be opportunities for lower quality, unethical programs to provide academically deficient learning experiences.

The use of on line courses will reach new students, expand service areas and will provide new avenues for learning. Those who are viewed as non traditional, who have not had success with education in the past or who can’t afford it or who live in areas with limited access will stand to benefit from this trend. Colleges and universities seem to be

moving to one of three types: traditional campus life with dorms for traditional students, virtual universities and hybrids.

Long distance learning will evolve and many small colleges will need to adapt to it in order to survive. Successful on line programs will need a quality administration with an appropriate infrastructure. Given the resource requirements, a hybrid structure would probably be the most reasonable strategy.

Endnotes

1. Arthur Levine has written extensively about postsecondary education trends. See for example Greene J.S. and A. Levine.

2. Emphasis, however, seems to be shifting from “process” to “outcomes” measurement. (IACBE)

3. Sometimes elite institutions find difficulty in developing a virtual university. (Arenson)

4. There seems to be some research that specific subgroups (i.e. females) within the non traditional student group benefit greatly from on line courses and synchronous and asynchronous interaction. (Arbaugh)

5. Although typically those who pursue education part time do not qualify for financial aid. States also may act to shelter local institutions from competition through the licensing and accreditation process. Accreditation programs may be given preferential treatment with regard to access to financial aid resources for students.

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